Sophia Sharif
Section 1D
TA: Avery Weinman

How was the social death of German Jewry in the 1930s a) effectuated by the state and so-called 'Aryan' Germans and b) experienced by Jewish women?

The societal alienation of German Jewry during the 1930s epitomizes a historical epoch where institutional prejudice and societal bias joined forces to progressively sideline Jewish existence in Germany. This multifaceted process, characterized by a slow but relentless stripping of social, economic, and political privileges, was driven not merely by government policies but also by the explicit and implicit complicity of non-Jewish Germans. Within this framework, Jewish women faced gender-specific hurdles given their predominant role in preserving familial unity and upholding the social fabric of Germany.

While the social demise of German Jewry in the 1930s was masterminded by the state, it was the enactment of these policies by ordinary Germans within their communities and personal relationships that cemented its reality. Initially, the Nazi regime meticulously targeted the most marginalized demographics, including homosexuals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and individuals with disabilities, capitalizing on ingrained prejudices with the expectation of minimal pushback (Bergen 72). To further this narrative, the state propagated derogatory labels such as "asocial" and "feebleminded," subtly manipulating the German language to reinforce its racial biases. By starting with these groups, the Nazi regime normalized discriminatory policies among groups least likely to garner public support, slowly conditioning Germans to accept an increasingly extreme reality. The regime soon incorporated a systematic isolation of Jews coupled with a deliberate diminishment of their societal contributions. The state enacted legislation like the Nuremberg laws that sanctioned and sometimes required attacks on German Jewry, legitimizing and weaponizing pre-existing antisemitism. Further, prominent Jewish figures, including Einstein and Hertz, were systematically expunged from public memory through book burnings

and explicit bans on their names, further heightening the alienation of Jews while minimizing their influence (Sarah Stein, "Social Death," 2023). However, it was complicity or, in some cases, active participation of non-Jewish Germans that played the key role in the social death of German Jewry. Economic gains from the exclusion of Jews and seizure of Jewish properties and businesses incentivized the silence or even active support of "Aryan" Germans (Sarah Stein, "Violence and Popular Responses," 2023). Furthermore, the pervasive spread of anti-Semitic propaganda precipitated grassroots anti-Jewish actions: non-Jews sought divorces from Jewish spouses, universities expelled Jewish faculty, and churches ostracized individuals who had converted from Judaism (Bergen 75). This broad-based indifference and complicity, punctuated by instances of active participation, functioned as a tacit endorsement of the regime's oppressive actions, empowering the Nazis to escalate their anti-Semitic policies. Thus, the roles of "Aryan" Germans, whether passive or active, were instrumental in facilitating the social death of German Jewry in the 1930s.

The social death manifested distinctly for Jewish women, who experienced a unique set of hardships as they grappled with the disintegration of their social networks, discrimination against their children, and restricted employment possibilities. Women were more deeply ingrained in their communities and more sensitive to social signals, and thus felt the pain of being ostracized more deeply. They lost their friends, lost their positions in community organizations, and were more sensitive than men to the growing hate towards Jews (Kaplan 580). For example, accounts show one woman feared that people would move away from her on the tram if they guessed that she's Jewish, and another stopped attending gatherings to prevent putting her Christian friends at risk (Kaplan 585-586). These challenges were compounded by the impact of antisemitism on their children. Mothers were the ones summoned to pick up their

children when they were expelled from schools, who had to find new schools for their children, and who grappled with their children's exclusion from social events (Kaplan 589). The emotional toll deepened on occasions like Mother's Day, where children were prohibited from singing along because, as a teacher explained, "I know that you have a mother too, but she is only a Jewish mother" (Kaplan 590). Further, workplace restrictions bore heavily on Jewish women, many of whom already had limited work opportunities compared to men . A notable shift in ambition was evident: during the 1930s, half of Jewish girls aimed to be seamstresses, when before the same girls would have aspired to business or professional careers (Kaplan 582). Under such pressure, the urge to emigrate was significantly more pronounced among women. Men, who were typically more engaged with the economy and could experience a significant blow to their social standing due to occupational changes upon emigration, were generally more inclined to stay (Kaplan 593). However, in the face of immediate physical danger, particularly after The Night of Broken Glass, more men ultimately fled than women. This was also attributed to men feeling less obliged to stay and care for elderly parents. This skewed departure pattern imposed an additional burden on the women left behind, often leaving them as the primary caregivers for their aging parents amidst increasing adversity (Kaplan 597). Thus, because women were less assimilated into the economy and more integrated into their local communities, women experienced a set of unique, gendered challenges throughout the 1930s.

References

Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide*, Chapters 3 and 4.

Marion Kaplan, “Jewish Women in Nazi Germany: Life, Daily Struggles, 1933-1939” Feminist Studies 16, no 3, Fall, 1990.

Sarah Stein, "Social Death," HIST 5 (lecture, UCLA, 2023)

Sarah Stein, "Violence and Popular Responses," HIST 5 (lecture, UCLA, 2023)